

*The President.* Smile—smile for the camera. [Laughter]

NOTE: The President spoke at 8:45 a.m. in the Roosevelt Room at the White House. In

his remarks, he referred to Debbie Johnson, wife of Administrator-designate Johnson. The transcript released by the Office of the Press Secretary also included the remarks of Administrator-designate Johnson.

Remarks in a Discussion on Strengthening Social Security in Westfield,  
New Jersey  
March 4, 2005

*The President.* Thanks for coming. Okay, let's get to work. Thanks for coming. A hundred years since a President has been here. I don't know what took the other ones so long to get here. [Laughter] Mr. Mayor, thanks. Mayor Greg McDermott, I appreciate your inviting me here, appreciate you being at the airport. I appreciate you and the local officials putting up with the entourage. Thank you all for coming.

My regret is Laura is not with me. She is doing great, though. She is a fabulous woman, and I'm a lucky guy that she has agreed to marry me.

I've got some things I want to talk about. I want to talk about freedom and peace. I want to talk about growing this economy. I want to talk about Social Security.

Before I do so, I do want to say thanks to Congressman Mike Ferguson for his great leadership in the House of Representatives. And Maureen—good to see you, Maureen. I see her. She's doing great. Thanks for coming.

Rodney Frelinghuysen is with us. Rodney, thank you, sir. Rodney and I were talking about, on Air Force One, how hard it is to be a baby boomer and trying to jog. [Laughter] Part of the problem we're going to face in Social Security is there's a lot of baby boomers like me and Rodney who are getting ready to retire. But I'm going to wait a little bit and talk about that.

I want to thank Scott Garrett for joining us—Congressman Scott Garrett. I'm very

honored that Congressman Steve Rothman is with us. I'm honored you're here, Congressman. Thanks for coming. I appreciate you coming. Thanks for being here.

I want to thank—there's a Congressman you probably have never heard of, or maybe you have. I shouldn't do that. I mean, that's unfair. I'm going from New Jersey to South Bend, Indiana, and a good fellow from South Bend, who happens to be the Congressman, said, "Can I have a ride?" And I said, "You bet." And his name is Chris Chocola, from South Bend, Indiana. Congressman, thanks for coming.

Mike Chertoff—anybody ever heard of him? He's now at the Department of Homeland Security—raised right here. So we're standing on the stage during the swearing-in—or maybe right before or right after—and he said, "Tell the home folks thanks." So, okay, Chertoff said, "Thanks." And I say thanks to Mike Chertoff for agreeing to serve in the Department of Homeland Security. He has got a big job. But he's capable of handling that job, and that job is to do all we can to make sure all Federal agencies work together to protect the American people.

And speaking about protecting the American people, I want to thank the family members and the supporters of the Guard unit right here from this armory that is in Iraq right now. When you e-mail your loved one, tell them the Commander in Chief is incredibly proud, and so is the rest of the country. And we are thankful

for the sacrifice and service not only of the men and women who wear the uniform but of their families as well.

I want to thank—welcome Jason Reed, 2004 Olympic Gold Medalist in rowing. I appreciate you coming, Jason. Good job.

Today when I landed, I met John Herrmann. John is a volunteer with the retired and senior volunteer program of Union County, New Jersey. What he does—he knows something about accounting, and so at tax time he helps the disabled or low-income or elderly individuals fill out their tax forms. What he is—he's a soldier in the army of compassion. He's a person who has taken his life—time out of his life to lend his talent to help a neighbor in need.

And the reason I bring that up is there's all kinds of ways to serve our country. We've got those wearing the uniform serving our country, whether it be abroad or here at home. But you can serve your country as well by feeding the hungry or finding shelter for the homeless or helping a low-income person fill out a tax reform [form]\*. You can serve your country just like John Herrmann is by volunteering and loving a neighbor just like you'd like to be loved yourselves. If you want to serve America, do so by helping save a soul and save a life. This country's real strength is the hearts and souls of our American citizens.

We're living in amazing times. You know, we're—I want the youngsters here to just remember the times in which you are growing up. In Afghanistan, millions voted for a President. The Palestinians elected a new leader. In Iraq, over 8 million people, in spite of the violence, in spite of the threats, said, "We refuse to be intimidated. We're going to vote. We want to be free."

Freedom is a powerful force for good. That's what the youngsters have got to recognize—and that freedom is just not a

Western idea; freedom is not an American idea; freedom is a—in my judgment—a gift from a higher being, a higher power. Everybody desires to be free. And the job of the United States is to work with others to help people realize what's deep in their soul, and that is the desire to live in a free society. And it's in our interest we do so.

Many of you were affected by the attacks of September the 11th. We'll stay on the hunt. We'll disrupt Al Qaida. We'll find them wherever they hide. But I will tell you the long-term solution to defeating hatred and hopelessness and the dark vision of Al Qaida and the likes of them is to spread freedom and hope around the world. And that's what you're seeing today.

It's an amazing time. I just came back from Europe. I had a great trip. I want to thank our friends overseas for being such wonderful hosts to Laura and me. I sat down with the French President, and we came—we understand some things. And one of the things we really understand is that Syria—Syrian troops, Syrian intelligence services, must get out of Lebanon now.

Lebanon is a democracy. Lebanon is a democracy, and we strongly support that democracy. I was pleased that Crown Prince Abdullah of Saudi Arabia sent the very same message. The world is beginning to speak with one voice. We want that democracy in Lebanon to succeed, and we know it cannot succeed so long as she is occupied by a foreign power, and that power is Syria. There's no half measures involved. When the United States and France and others say, "Withdraw," we mean complete withdrawal, no half-hearted measures. And those of you who are trying to analyze our foreign policy, just remember, democracy leads to peace, the peace we all want for our children and our grandchildren.

The economy is getting better. Today we got some good news. We added 262,000

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\* White House correction.

new jobs last month. The national unemployment rate is 5.4 percent. It's 4.2 percent right here in the great State of New Jersey, and that's good news. But we're living in a dynamic world. Things change, and the fundamental question is, what do we do to keep our economy growing? I've told the Congress one way to do so is to make sure we've got certainty in the Tax Code. They need to make the tax cuts permanent.

I sent up a budget that says I understand we need to do something about the deficits, and I'm looking forward to working with the Budget Committees in both the House and the Senate. I thought it was pretty smart of me to say to the American people at the State of the Union, we're going to be wise about how we spend your money, and if a program is not working, we're not going to spend the money on it. Seems realistic and logical.

I want to thank the House and the Senate for getting a good piece of legal reform to my desk. One way to make sure the economy continues to grow is to make sure the scales of justice are balanced. They were not balanced when it came to class-action lawsuits. Too many class-action lawsuits were driving too many good people out of business, which meant people weren't able to find a job. And so we reformed the class-action lawsuit system in America for the better. And they need to do the same thing on asbestos reform and medical liability reform.

I can spend a lot of time on a lot of subjects, but Laura told me, "You're going to have some panelists up there. Give them a chance to speak." [Laughter] I will in a minute. [Laughter] I know, I'm going on too long. I'm just getting warmed up, then. Here we go. Let me talk about—let me get right to the subject at hand. I've asked some of our fellow citizens to join us on an incredibly important subject, and that's Social Security.

First, let me say to you that the Social Security system has been a very important system, and I understand that. Social Secu-

rity has provided a safety net for many retirees, and that's an important safety net. But the safety net has got a hole in it, and we need to make sure we save that safety net for future generations of Americans to come.

The first thing I want to tell you about Social Security is that if you're getting your check, nothing will change. No matter what the talk is about reform, nothing will change. I don't care what the ads say. I don't care what the scare tactics say. You're going to get your check, just like the Government said. The problem isn't for the seniors. The problem is for the youngsters coming up; the question is, will you get your check? Will we be able to keep the promise?

A lot of people say, "Well, Mr. President, you're talking about Social Security. It's called the third rail of American politics. That means, if you touch it, you get a huge electric shock. Now, why are you talking about it?" Well, you're going to hear me describe the problem. But I think we have a duty in elected office to confront problems and not pass them on to future Presidents, future Congresses, and future generations.

I didn't run for office to dodge problems. And I don't think the American people—I don't care what your political party is, they don't—I think the American people expect us all to confront problems and deal with them in a fair, open way. That's what I think.

Now, let me tell you why I think we got a problem. And me and Rodney are part of the problem; we're baby boomers, and we're fixing to retire. Matter of fact, a lot of us turn 62 in 2008. That's the time you start to retire, and there's a whole lot of us. Yet we're living longer. We're living longer than the previous generations of Americans. So you got more people retiring who are living longer, plus we have been promised greater benefits than the previous generation. So we got more people living longer getting bigger benefits. And

the problem is, is that the number of people paying into the system is shrinking.

If you look over here, in the fifties, 16 people were paying into the system to pay for one retiree. So if that person was to get \$14,200, say, it would be \$900 a payer. The system now is 3.3 people paying into the system. In a decade, it's going to be two people paying in the system.

Now, this is a pay-as-you-go system. In other words, it says when you retire, somebody is going to have to pay for your benefits. This is not a savings account. One of the myths of Social Security is that your money is going into it and the Government is holding it and saving it for you. That's not the way it works. Your money is going into the system, and it's getting spent, some of it on retirement benefits, other parts on just general Government. And there's an IOU, a paper IOU accumulating. But it's not just sitting there. There's not an account with your name that's saying, on behalf of you, the Government has now got your money. That's not the way it works. So it's a pay-as-you-go. It goes in and goes out.

Now, let me give you some numbers about the consequences of what we're talking about, and this chart says it pretty good. Right now, there are more people paying in—the money coming in on payroll taxes is greater than the money going out, and that's the black part of the chart. But very soon, in a very quick period of time—as a matter of fact, in 2018—the money going out exceeds the money coming in, in Social Security. In other words, baby boomers like me, who will be living longer and have been promised greater benefits, are going to start saying, “Send me my check.” And those of you paying in are going to start to have to pay into a system that is going into the red every year. As you can see, that number gets worse and worse as time goes on.

In 2028, the number of—the amount of the money that needs to be paid in order to make the promises is 200 billion a year

above and beyond payroll taxes. And it gets bigger every year. It gets into 300 billion a year. So when you got more money going out, in terms of the promises made to baby boomers retiring and fewer people paying in, this thing gets into the red in a real hurry. That's why I say we got a problem.

Now, 2018, some would say, “That's not—that's pretty far down the road, isn't it?” Think about that—2018, if you're a mom with a 5-year-old child, that person's going to be driving, and you're going to get gray hair before you know it. [Laughter] I mean, we're talking about right around the corner, when you think about it. Those of us in public office must look down the road. We can't say, “Well, don't worry. I'm on a 2-year term,” or “I'm on a 6-year term,” or “I'm on a 4-year term. We'll just let somebody else deal with it,” because the longer you wait, the harder the problem is.

Imagine waiting until 2018, and you're a young worker, and the Government says, “Oh, by the way, I'm going to have to raise your payroll taxes again in order to pay for the benefits we promised,” or, “We're going to have to slash this program, that program.” I mean, eventually, when you're spending at least 200 billion above and beyond that which you've got in payroll taxes and increases every year, something drastic has to happen. If we act now, we can do so in a way that saves the system for younger workers.

I'm going to tell you again; I'm going to keep saying it all around the country—and I like doing this, by the way. I like going around the country saying, “Folks, we have got a problem.” And I like saying to people, don't worry about it if you've been born prior to 1950. Nothing changes. You're going to get what you're promised. But I'm also saying to younger workers, you better listen carefully to this debate because you're the ones who are going to have to pay for it. And if I were you, I'd be saying, “Well, if we have a problem,

Mr. President, what do you and the Congress intend to do about it?"

Right now we're wondering whether we've got a problem. I've been reading the newspapers and been seeing some folks saying, "There's not a problem. He's just exaggerating." Well, I'm going to keep telling people we've got a problem until it sinks in, because we've got one. The facts are irrefutable. You can't dodge whether we have a problem or not. Because, see, the next follow-on question to that is, "If you've got a problem, what do you Republicans and Democrats and a few independents intend to do about it up there? Are you going to sit around and play politics? Or are you going to get it to table and do your duty as public servants?"

And so I started that process. When I gave my State of the Union, I said, "Put your ideas on the table." I said, "Come on, bring some ideas forward. We have an obligation." And I reminded people that Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan had some good ideas. President Clinton, my predecessor, had some good ideas. Former Democrat Congressman Tim Penny had some good ideas—all of them interesting ideas that need to be in the mix in order to permanently solve this problem. And so I want to say again to folks who are listening here today, I'm really interested in working with members of both parties to be able to say we've done our duty.

Now, I've got some ideas, and I wanted to share one of the ideas with you right now. I believe in order to make the system work better for younger workers, they ought to be able—be allowed to, at their choice, to take some of their own money and set it aside in a personal savings account. That's what I think we ought to consider.

Let me tell you why it makes sense to me that—first of all, the Government can't meet its promises. But one way for a younger worker to come close to what the Government has promised is to be able to take a portion of the money and get a

better rate of return on your own money than that which the Social Security system gets. See, there's something called the compounding rate of interest. That's when you set aside a dollar or a series of dollars, and it grows over time. And obviously, if the rate on your money is 2 percent, it will grow at a certain pace. If it's 4 percent, it grows double that. And right now the money—your money is earning very little compared to what you can get in conservative stocks and bonds and investments. I'm talking conservative; I'm not talking about lottery, taking it to the track—[laughter]—a conservative mix of stocks and bonds just like Federal employees get in the employee Thrift Savings Plan. And just like we give people who work for the Government, you can take some of your own money, set it aside, and watch it grow.

Do you realize that if you're a person who earns an average of \$35,000 a year over your working career, \$35,000, and you're allowed to take—put 4 percent of the money—the payroll tax aside in a personal account, and you hold it over time, that when you retire, you'll save a quarter of a million dollars. That's your money. That money, by the way, the quarter of a million dollars, is the capital account. Now, you can't spend all that the minute you retire. This is a retirement account we're talking about. But it's your money, and the interest off that money goes to supplement the Social Security check that you're going to get from the Federal Government. See, personal accounts is an add-on to that which the Government is going to pay you. It doesn't replace the Social Security system. It is a part of making—getting a better rate of return, though, so—to come closer to the promises made. That's important to know.

Secondly, you just can't take it all out. I mean, it's a retirement system. There will be rules about withdrawal. You can't put it in certain things if you—start-ups. There are guidelines to encourage you to make the right kind of investments. Now, you

can alter stocks and bonds and different things—your choice. But it's been proven that when you hold money over a period of time in safe, conservative investments, it gets a better rate of return than the money you get in the Social Security system. So there will be guidelines about what you can invest in.

We've got to make sure the system is fair to poor Americans. And so there's ways to make sure the benefit structure is fair. But let me talk to you about investing. There's a certain notion in America that the investor class is only a certain type of person. I just don't believe that. I don't subscribe to that. I don't think that's what America is about. I think we ought to encourage people from all walks of life to own something. I think ownership is a vital part of being a productive citizen in our country. I think we ought to encourage ownership, not discourage ownership. And I think we ought to recognize people from all walks of life are plenty capable about managing their own affairs.

I'm getting ready, hold on. I'm winding down here. *[Laughter]* Think about a system where you've accumulated a nest egg of your own—the 35,000-a-year person, a quarter-of-a-million-dollar nest egg—and that when you pass on, you can leave it to whom you want. In other words, that person can then take it and spend it tomorrow if they feel like it. But it's your asset. See, it's your money to begin with.

The Social Security system today—if you're a young widow and the money your husband put in, there's nothing there. There's no asset. There's a Government promise that at a certain age you'll get a stipend. But there's no assets there, see? And so what we're talking about is really changing how the system works so that your money can earn a better rate of return, and that after your—when you pass on, you can pass that money on to whomever you want. So we're talking about helping people build up an asset base, which I think is a vital part of a stable future.

It also has the added benefit of providing more savings. And when there's more savings, there's more investment. And when there's more investment, there's more jobs. It will be good for the economy as well.

So I'm interested in this idea. I'm excited about it. I've spent a lot of time talking about it to people. I understand we're going to have to explain to people, over time, when we talk with Congress, how this works. I've said it makes sense to phase it in very slowly so that we can better afford the transition cost to go from one system to another. But I'll tell you this: If we don't act, we're looking at about an \$11 trillion hole for the American taxpayers that are coming up. This is a big liability—not for me and baby boomers. We're fine. Rodney and I are just fine. We lucked out when it came time to—the year we were born.

But if you're born—if you're a young worker, you've got a problem. And I repeat, I hope—I hope that as time goes on and this debate goes forward, that you understand the power of your voice to say to people, "We've seen enough of this, 'We're not going to move because somebody might look good,' or, 'We don't want to do it because my political party told me not to do something.' " Now is the time to get rid of all that—all that deadlock in Washington, and focus on the problem for the good of the generation to come.

All right. Olivia Mitchell is with us. Olivia, tell us what you do.

*[At this point, Olivia Mitchell, executive director, Pension Research Council, Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania, and former member, President's Commission to Strengthen Social Security, made brief remarks.]*

*The President.* Well, I appreciate that, Olivia. It is very important—*[applause]*. Thank you all. It is very important for those folks—and listen, I understand there's a lot of people who rely exclusively on their Social Security checks, and I know that. And

it is very important for people to not be frightened by the discussion about making sure your grandchildren have got a system around. I mean, one of the great things about the generation who now relies upon Social Security is there's a deep concern about generations coming up. And this really is a generational issue, and I want to thank you for bringing that up.

Speaking about that, we've got John Bligh with us. Welcome.

*John Bligh.* Hi, Mr. President.

*The President.* How are you?

*Mr. Bligh.* Fine, thank you.

[*Mr. Bligh, senior citizen, East Northport, NY, made brief remarks.*]

*The President.* Well, I appreciate you, John. Thanks, good job. Thank you, very good.

See, I think the operative word is that he's not worried about getting his check—counts on his check, not worried about it. That's what I—one of the things I'm going to continue saying around this country, and by the way, this is State number 10, and tomorrow is 11, and I'm keeping moving. I just say I'm going to a lot of places. I'm not going to go away on this issue because it's vital, and we've got to do something for the younger folks.

And the fact that John said he's not worried about the check, the check that he's been promised, is an important statement. He said, "I need it, and I'm not worried about it." And I want others to hear that as well.

Then he invited—Lisa—who invited who? Did you invite Dad, or did he invite himself?

*Lisa Engler.* Well—I'm sorry—the truth of the matter is, I need my parents on a regular basis to help me, because I have five children—

*The President.* Five kids, that's good, yes.

*Mrs. Engler.* —and I really can't do it all on my own. So anyway, yes, I'm Lisa Engler. I'm here with my husband, Will. We have five children.

*The President.* Right. John is your dad.

*Mrs. Engler.* And my dad. And Social Security, of course, for me is an issue, because not only did I work in the workforce for 10 years and saw a big chunk of my money go into Social Security, and all the senior managers telling me, you know, "It may not be here for you. Invest in 401(k)," but now, looking at the numbers and everything, it's very frightening as a parent. I have a 3-month-old daughter who, at the age of 65, this system will be bankrupt for almost 30 years. It's frightening.

*The President.* In 2042, it goes broke, for good. It not only goes in the red, but whatever paper is available in the form of IOUs is gone. I mean, it's just—it's a fact.

*Mrs. Engler.* And there's no getting around it. I mean, we all know it. We all heard—

*The President.* No, not everybody knows it yet. They're going to know it.

*Mrs. Engler.* Oops.

*The President.* You know it. It's all right.

[*Mrs. Engler, stay-at-home mom, Westfield, NJ, made further remarks.*]

*The President.* There you go. [Laughter] Yes, and not only that—that's a good—very good. And not only do you watch your money grow, but you watch people making decisions about the economy. In other words, there's a certain sense of when you own something, you actually own a stake, and the future matters a lot.

You know, I love the fact that more people are owning their home in America than ever before. I love the fact that people are owning their own business in America, people from all walks of life. And I think it makes sense to encourage ownership when it comes to retirement systems.

Carlos Pagan.

*Carlos Pagan.* Thank you, Mr. President.

*The President.* First of all, he's a firefighter, and I'm proud of you.

*Mr. Pagan.* Thank you, Mr. President.

*The President.* Good job. All right, where are you a firefighter?

*Mr. Pagan.* I'm a fireman in the city of Paterson.

*The President.* Good, yes. Thank you. Staying in good shape?

*Mr. Pagan.* Yes, sir.

*The President.* One thing about those firefighters, they stay in good shape. You also—

*Mr. Pagan.* I own a real estate company in the city of Paterson. Again, my name is Carlos Pagan. I'm 33 years old. I'm raising two kids. I have a daughter named Vanessa; she's 15.

*The President.* No, you're not 15. [Laughter]

*Mr. Pagan.* And my son, Steven; he's 13.

*The President.* So like, teenagers?

*Mr. Pagan.* Yes, sir.

*The President.* Yes—I've been there. [Laughter]

[*Mr. Pagan, owner, Century 21 Northern Realty, and firefighter, Paterson, NJ, made further remarks.*]

*The President.* Let me tell you an interesting statistic. You know, Carlos—I was getting ready to tell you, the other day I was at one of these forums, and the person said, "People like me"—see, she had read a survey that said people her age thought they were likely to see a UFO before they'd get a Social Security check when they retire. [Laughter] Kind of an interesting observation, isn't it? [Laughter] So here's Carlos, a firefighter, saying, "Just give me a chance to manage some of my own money."

Things have changed in America since I was Carlos's age. I don't remember 401(k)s when I was 30 years old. Maybe they were there; I just wasn't observant of it. I don't think 401(k)s came into being. I don't think there was this notion of defined contribution plans. So here we are, talking to a brave firefighter, talking about, "Give me a chance to contribute to my own plan." It's kind of interesting, isn't it? It's an interesting shift of attitude. There's a lot of folks that may not realize this;

there's a whole kind of investor culture that is growing up throughout the whole younger generation. People are used to it, used to the concept of opening up a quarterly statement and saying, "Look at my asset base. Look how it is growing."

That's an important thing that people need to hear, particularly people in the United States Congress, that we're not talking about a foreign idea of allowing people to take some of their own money, in order so that that money can grow at a better rate than that which is in the Government, so that when they come to retire, it can be closer to the benefits promised by the Federal Government. That's what we're talking about.

I think it's interesting, don't you, that Carlos is—he's got an entrepreneurial spirit to begin with, right? When did you start your own business?

*Mr. Pagan.* Seven years ago, sir.

*The President.* Making a living?

*Mr. Pagan.* Yes, doing all right.

*The President.* That's good, yes. It's what we like to hear. [Laughter] Employing people?

*Mr. Pagan.* Yes, and this summer, I'm going to employ my daughter for the first time, and she'll be able to contribute to Social Security.

*The President.* That's good. Good job.

Okay. Brian Dougherty. Welcome.

*Brian Dougherty.* Thank you, sir. It's a pleasure to be here, Mr. President.

*The President.* Glad you're here. Age?

*Mr. Dougherty.* Twenty-three.

*The President.* See, he's nervous, and should be. Not about sitting up here—[laughter].

*Mr. Dougherty.* I'm 23 years old. I live in Hoboken, New Jersey, now. I'm a sales manager at the Hilton Short Hills around the corner.

*The President.* Business all right?

*Mr. Dougherty.* Business is good.

*The President.* You deserve a promotion, then, what the heck. [Laughter]



*Mr. Dougherty.* Well, thank you. Maybe if we can get you to stay in the Presidential suite, which is calling your name.

*The President.* Very good.

*Mr. Dougherty.* Your next overnight trip, sir.

*The President.* That's called turning the tide on the old boy, you know. That's good. [Laughter]

[*Mr. Dougherty made further remarks.*]

*The President.* It's interesting, isn't it? Listen to this 23-year-old guy. He's saying, "I've analyzed it. I started to pay attention to it. And when I looked at the math, I realized I'm going to be on the short end of the stick." In other words, you can put all the money in you want, but because of the demographics and the math, there's not going to be anything left. You're just paying for me, and I—and I appreciate it. [Laughter] We're happy you are. The question is, will you be paying for anything for yourself? And the answer is, not unless we reform this system. That's what the message is here today.

Keep going, you're on a roll. Keep going.

*Mr. Dougherty.* The other thing, Mr. President—we had an opportunity to speak backstage, and I appreciate your listening. I'm here to ask that Congress listens. You don't see many 23-year-olds on the MSNBC circuit or anything like that at nighttime, but we have something to say, and we're concerned about the issue.

*The President.* Yes. You sure do have something to say. See, here's the thing about this issue. I actually ran on it. I said, "Vote for me, and I'm going to do something about Social Security, and I'm going to try to put out some innovative ideas to fix it." And in the past, people would say, "Don't campaign on Social Security; you'll

get beat." It used to be politically that if you just said something about it, they would run ads saying, "Well, Bush is going to take away your check." And they actually did that in 2000, I was told. And fortunately, when I ran the next time, I was able to say, "Well, we didn't take away your check."

But I'm still talking about it because I think it's an issue we need to talk about. I think it's an important issue. And the dynamics have changed. Young people are beginning to say, "What about my check? What's going to be around for me?"

This is a generational issue. People born from 1950 and before have nothing to worry about; the promise is going to be made. The fundamental question is, will the Congress have the will and the desire to work with the administration so that we can say to people like Brian and Carlos and everybody else up here that are born after 1950, "We hear your voice, too. We know you've got a concern, and we want to make sure this very important system, the retirement system, is modernized and reformed so you'll have the safety net when you retire as well."

Listen, I want to thank you all for giving us a chance to discuss this. I want to thank our panelists. God bless. Thanks for coming.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:56 a.m. at the Westfield Armory. In his remarks, he referred to Mayor Gregory S. McDermott of Westfield, NJ; Maureen Ferguson, wife of Representative Mike Ferguson; President Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan; President Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) of the Palestinian Authority; President Jacques Chirac of France; and Crown Prince Abdullah of Saudi Arabia.

Remarks in a Discussion on Strengthening Social Security in Notre Dame,  
Indiana

March 4, 2005

*The President.* Thank you all. Please be seated. Thanks for coming. More importantly, thanks for letting me come. We're here to have a dialog with some of our fellow citizens about Social Security. But I've got some things I want to share with you before we get there.

First, this is a serious conversation, and it's an important conversation. This is a conversation about the future of the country. And I want to thank Father Malloy and Father Jenkins for letting us come to this fantastic—letting me come back to this fantastic university. I come back as a graduate—well, kind of a graduate. I got a degree—[*laughter*—honorary degree. [*Laughter*] For all you C students out there, it's amazing what can happen to you if you keep working hard. [*Laughter*]

It's such an honor to be with Father Hesburgh as well. What a great American. I'm proud to be in your presence, sir.

I'm glad to be here with my man, Mitch. Governor, we miss you. He was a solid member of my Cabinet, and he's a solid buddy.

Laura sends her best, by the way. She is doing great. Believe it or not, she's in Death Valley, California, looking at wildflowers. [*Laughter*] She loves flowers, and I love her.

I appreciate Congressman Chris Chocola. He is a strong leader. See, I've been up there long enough to be able to determine who knows how to lead and who's just up there holding office. You've got a leader in Chris, and I appreciate your leadership. Congressman Mark Souder is with us. Mark, thanks for coming; appreciate working with you as well.

I know the attorney general is here, Attorney General Steve Carter. Thank you for being here, General. Mayor Luecke is with us. Mr. Mayor, I'm honored you're here.

Thanks for—you tell those firefighters and policemen how grateful I am for them having to stand out in the cold to deal with my entourage. But thanks very much. Mayor Jeff Rea, good to see you, Jeff. Thanks a lot.

Most of all, thank you all for sharing your time and paying attention to some crucial issues. First, I do want to talk a little foreign policy. You know, I believe deep in everybody's soul is the desire to live in freedom. I told a lot of people around the country that freedom is not America's gift to the world; freedom is the Almighty's gift to each person in this world. And that's what I believe.

And I know we've got some students here, and you're living in an amazing—we're all living in amazing times, when you think about what has taken place in a brief period of time. I mean, millions voted in Afghanistan to elect a President. That country has gone from darkness to light because of freedom. The Palestinians have elected a new leader who is showing courage. And I believe someday soon there will be a Palestinian state living side by side with Israel in peace. The Iraqis defied the terrorists and went to the polls by the millions because they want to live in a free society.

The desire for people to self-govern and to live in a free world is catching on in parts of the Middle East. In Beirut, Lebanon, thousands of people took to the streets in peaceful protests because they're saying, "We want to live in freedom as well." And now it's time for Syria to end its occupation of that good democracy. They need to remove all their troops, all their secret services. They need to listen to the voices of not only the United States and France and other European countries but the voices of people like Crown Prince Abdullah from Saudi Arabia. The leader of